

# **Baccalaureate 2014: Address by President Barry Mills**

Barry Mills  
Baccalaureate Remarks  
May 23, 2014

Good afternoon. This is the time of year when we gather to celebrate the achievements of our graduating seniors, to reflect on the academic year now coming to a close, and to rededicate ourselves to the founding values of this College—particularly the ideals of liberal education and our historic commitment to serving the common good.

The Baccalaureate has its origins in a “sermon” delivered to a graduating class, and I could join the voices heard all over the country this time of year giving you advice about what is to come and urging you to go forth and do this or that with the degrees you have earned. But my approach here has been to focus less on each of you—there will be plenty of that tomorrow—and rather, to speak to important issues affecting our College and higher education in America.

For many of you, we’ve already had the conversation about what comes after Bowdoin and how to hit the ground running.

In late February and March, I led a program for Bowdoin seniors that the College called “Get Ready for Life After Bowdoin” and that I called, simply, “Core Skills.” It was designed to address “real world” issues these seniors would face as they leave Bowdoin and enter the work force.

We talked about budgets and stress and apartments and debt and job expectations and stocks and all sorts of other important topics. The program consisted of four sessions in the evening that lasted for about ninety minutes each. I was very pleased to see that somewhere between 70-120 seniors attended each session.

I led the first session about what to expect when you go to work. A friend from the Fullbridge program joined me for the second talk on personal budgeting, and another Fullbridge expert led the third session on personal finance and investing. The final gathering was great fun, as five recent Bowdoin graduates joined us to talk about how they set up their lives in Boston, New York, San Francisco and Washington, D.C., with some focus also on Italy. The discussions were lively and the students were very engaged... well, maybe not as engaged as they are with Karen at the etiquette dinner, but she has props. Good food, drinks, and embarrassing stories about my etiquette certainly help bring out the crowd!

It was very interesting for me to talk with the students at these events about their goals and expectations for their first jobs and careers. I am certainly of a different generation and there is much written today about how the younger generations are focused on doing important work, but also very much focused on the work/life balance. All of this came out as we talked.

I asked the students what they want from their first jobs. They answered that they want to use their education at Bowdoin to do important work. They want to be mentored, engage in policy, feel valued, and have enough time to enjoy life.

I asked them what they thought their employers expect and their responses were generally that employers want all the same things. I had to tell them pretty directly that no, what their employers want is for them to show up on time, be enthusiastic about the work, and get the work done.

I also spoke with students about how to dress, how to deal with a difficult boss, how to get an assignment for work, and how to balance their personal and professional worlds in a work environment. And, I reminded these students that they are about to embark on creating a “currency” that will follow them for a lifetime—a reputation for the quality of the work they do, but even more importantly a reputation for what kind of person they are.

These sessions elicited a very enthusiastic response from alumni and parents. I received all kinds of advice on the messages our students need to hear. One trustee wrote, “Remind them that it’s all about data, details, and deadlines.” A Bowdoin parent—my good friend, Harry Newton—provided me with a “Letterman” top-ten list. Harry encourages students to start their own businesses. “Make your own mistakes,” he says, “because people never learn from others’ mistakes, only their own.” His list included the advice to start saving and investing early so you learn this stuff in real time in a real way, even if you lose a little money here and there. Harry also repeats my counsel about protecting your reputation, and, my favorite, he reminds us that irrevocable decisions need to be made very carefully—decisions about marriage, children, and tattoos.

The sessions were fun and the students kept coming back, so I think they found them valuable. I’ve been in a classroom at Bowdoin over the years as a guest lecturer, but this was a vivid reminder for me of how difficult it is to teach well and to engage students in a serious way over a sustained period of time. The Bowdoin faculty does this day in and day out for a whole semester, and I was committed for only four sessions.

It’s gratifying to hear the enthusiastic response from alumni and parents when we engage our students in real world issues in the classroom, in our labs, and even in “after school” sessions like Karen’s etiquette dinner and my “Core Skills” program. These folks are grateful that Bowdoin, and in particular Karen and I, recognize the challenges students face today, and parents are especially thrilled that their kids are willing to listen to somebody on these issues, since their own attempts are often met with somewhat less than enthusiasm from their kids. With three sons of our own, Karen and I can relate!

But, the enthusiasm for this instruction also arises out of generalized concerns expressed often in the national media—concerns that are very troubling for the health of educational institutions. There is anxiety and uncertainty from all quarters about the preparation for employment and success that students receive today.

Interestingly, I find the anxiety to be quite broad based. It comes from families at the upper end of the income brackets who are concerned that their kids will not have the same opportunities they have had in life. It comes from lower- and middle-income families who struggle with our costs and worry about the burden of student debt. It comes from the right with complaints about our values, and from the left with charges that these places sustain income inequality in America and do nothing to improve the social or economic mobility of our citizenry. Mostly, it comes from those unconvinced that a liberal arts education can prepare young people for jobs and success in a world economy dominated by technology and innovation.

I assure you it can, and at Bowdoin College, it does.

There are all kinds of metrics and measures, but one need only examine the success of our alumni over the generations and particularly over the last fifteen years to understand that our students have learned well at this College and are prepared for life after Bowdoin. Our graduates are doing important work in all walks of life, in the professions, the arts, technology companies, nonprofits, the military, start-ups, finance, medicine, education, academia, and on and on. And while the Class of 2014 will soon be the latest group to demonstrate the value of a Bowdoin degree, for the long-term health of our College, it is essential that we stop to reflect on these issues, that we take nothing for granted, and that we guard constantly against becoming complacent.

On the question of values, there is no doubt that American college campuses are, by nature and reputation, largely places of progressive and liberal perspective, particularly among their faculties. Bowdoin is no different in this respect from most colleges or universities in America. How this has come to be has been studied widely for colleges and universities and is, I suspect, largely related to choices people make when they enter the world of academic scholarship.

The men and women of our faculty are not “potted plants,” so we do not expect them to be without views and perspective, but we are confident that there is balance in the classroom and around the campus so that our students who represent many different backgrounds and perspectives are free to express their views and debate their positions. Even your college president this year has found himself challenged by any number of students on a variety of issues where they disagree passionately with my position. Our conversations have been lively, mostly respectful, and no one has felt the least compunction about telling me flat out that I am dead wrong. As you might imagine, if you know me a little, I disagreed.

At Bowdoin, we believe that education is endowed for the benefit of all of society, and that we each have a responsibility to cooperate with others for common ends. The passion with which our students approach important issues is proof that they understand these fundamental values of our College. For those who remain cynical about the importance or relevance of this commitment to the common good, our students and our graduates once again prove the point. The proof is in Bowdoin alumni of past generations and the young alumni out there today in a very challenging economic environment who nonetheless spend their time, energy, and resources in support of their communities here and abroad. And, the proof is in our students here in Brunswick who link the good work they do in the community with academic endeavors in fields like environmental studies, earth and oceanographic science, government, sociology, and

education. This direct linkage between Bowdoin's commitment to the common good and our curriculum serves our students well into the future because they understand the benefit of fact-based analysis in their daily work in support of a better society.

Of course, none of this is possible if young people of great promise are denied access to a Bowdoin education and the opportunities it provides. Over these past thirteen years we have worked together in intentional and strategic ways to make sure that Bowdoin is a place where every student who ought to be at Bowdoin has the opportunity to be here, regardless of financial means. This does not mean in any respect that we have a bias against students whose families have had good fortune financially. Students from these families who have also accomplished at the highest levels clearly deserve to be here and they add a great deal of talent and energy to our community.

Our world is a very complex place and I know from experience that despite financial stability and success, even those most successful out there are concerned that their sons and daughters get the very best education possible, since there is no guarantee that these students will succeed at the level of their families without a lot of hard work and a sound education. They may have a wider safety net than most, but they face many of the same challenges for success and benefit equally from their experience here over four years.

For students from low- or middle-income families, the door to a college education can seem to be closing. College costs are significant, and the struggle to meet them can be at best, discouraging, and at worst, futile. At Bowdoin, we have made important efforts to keep the door open to all who deserve to be here. For example, Bowdoin for generations has created opportunity for young men and women from the State of Maine, and in doing so, we have changed lives. Maine is not a wealthy state and so this commitment has required the College to support many of these students. In fact, nearly seventy percent of Maine students who attend Bowdoin require some measure of aid, and we are thrilled by their accomplishments and grateful for their contributions to the College.

Nearly forty-five percent of our students receive some measure of financial aid from the College. Approximately, fourteen percent of our students are recipients of Pell Grants, available to the neediest students in our country. Fourteen percent of our students are first-generation college students; students like me whose parents didn't graduate from college, or in some cases didn't even earn a high-school degree.

So, we have worked hard to ensure that Bowdoin is different. We are a place that creates opportunity for students from all socioeconomic brackets and we are committed to providing our students with the opportunity for the American dream—to do better than their parents and to make a better life for themselves, for their families, and for their communities.

Bowdoin is also different, dare I say exceptional, because over ninety-six percent of our students return here after their first year in college where the national average is only about sixty-seven percent. And, over ninety-six percent of our students graduate from the College in six years, with nearly all of those graduating in four years. These numbers are not significantly different for students from low-income families versus students from wealthier families.

We read all the time that students graduate from college with crushing debt that destroys dreams. Even more tragically, students often leave college with crushing debt without obtaining a degree. Again, Bowdoin is different. Because of our financial aid policies, we do not require students to borrow to finance their education. Although we find that some students still do borrow, there are very, very few students who graduate from Bowdoin with a level of debt that will affect their future life decisions.

All of this does not happen by chance or good fortune.

Our College is intentional and thoughtful about its mission and its strategy. We are blessed with a faculty devoted to our students and to their scholarship, and who involve our students in that scholarship.

Our residential life system is compassionate with a strong sense of community guided by talented professionals and our students. But, it is also a residential life system that holds students to the mark of our campus culture and to standards that we apply rigorously and with fairness so that everyone on our campus feels secure. And, we have a staff that is simply the best. Just check out the lobster bake tonight and see how many people working in dining know your sons and daughters personally.

And, so as I read and watch in the media the criticisms of colleges and university systems that are often sadly accurate, I can say with pride that our College understands its responsibility and its mission—a mission to open our doors to students from everywhere who ought to be at Bowdoin based on their brains and talents; a mission to educate students in the liberal arts tradition that will allow them to be leaders in all walks of life; and a mission grounded in a residential life system that promotes leadership, principled leadership, and is grounded on the dignity and respect due each of our students on campus.

We are a place that recognizes that college is also about having fun. And, we are a place that understands that our students must be prepared for work and life after Bowdoin. Today, as we get ready to graduate the Class of 2014, we are once again confident in that preparation and in each of you. You leave Bowdoin knowing what history tells us—and what recent history tells us—that you are well prepared for that first job and the jobs that will certainly come after. For those of you still on the job hunt, history also tells us that by the time of Homecoming in October you find your place, particularly if you utilize the Bowdoin family network.

But let us also remember that a Bowdoin education is much more than preparation for a job. It is preparation for life and it is the education of an engaged citizenry. Your education does not end when I hand you your diplomas tomorrow morning. Bowdoin has opened your minds and prepared you, and you will continue to learn. You will continue to learn to be better writers and better speakers. You will hone your artistic skills and improve your research abilities. You will expand your capacity for critical thinking and sound judgment, all the while mindful of your Bowdoin experience and your commitment to the common good. And, you will, in a life done right and in the Bowdoin tradition, find the joy that comes from being fearless and intentional and thoughtful learners and leaders well into the future.

It has been a joy to lead this great College for the last thirteen years and I look forward to next year—my second senior year at Bowdoin. Our future is strong and our path is resolute as long as we remain committed to an ambitious future. And so to the Class of 2014, I look forward to our years together. Tomorrow, you become the future of Bowdoin. Be ambitious for yourselves, for your families, for your communities, and for your College.

Now, as we prepare to close this academic year, a word of gratitude to the Bowdoin faculty:

Thank you for your dedication to our students, to your scholarship, and to Bowdoin. I wish you all well as you continue throughout the summer months on your scholarship, research, and artistic work, and I look forward to reconvening the College with you one more time in the fall.

To our dedicated and fantastic staff: Thank you!

To our graduating seniors: We wish you all the very best as you prepare to leave Brunswick. We are proud of you and of everything you have accomplished here, and we look forward to saluting you on the Quad tomorrow morning.

Finally, let us remind ourselves of where we started four years ago with “The Offer of the College,” those words of William DeWitt Hyde from 1906:

“...to make hosts of friends who are to be leaders in all walks of life; to lose oneself in generous enthusiasms and cooperate with others for common ends.”

To the Class of 2014—you future artists, leaders, statesmen, and stateswomen—to each of you who will bring even greater pride to Bowdoin in years to come, I wish you success and a life of learning and deeds well done.